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# BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITIES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

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The Gender Development Association (GDA) is a Lao non-profit organisation working to promote gender equality through the rule of law and good governance. It has been involved in protecting women and girls from gender-based violence and ensuring that civil society organisations and government agencies, at national and provincial levels, had access to relevant judicial procedures. Starting in 2015, it collected and analysed data on gender-based violence and traditional practices in the ethnic minority areas. As a result of this project, there was an increase in women's access to information, their decision-making ability showed improvement, and their social security was boosted through livelihood strategies that facilitated their access to resources and employment.

The Peoples' Republic of Laos – officially known as Lao PDR – has started to narrow its gender disparities, but still lags behind many other countries in this respect. A key challenge for the government is to successfully manage development and poverty reduction efforts in ways that are inclusive, pro-poor and gender-responsive.

The objectives of the Lao PDR's National Strategy for the Advancement of Women 2011-2015 included ensuring all women can live in safe conditions, enjoy equality with men and achieve their full potential in politics, the economy and culture, as well as in social and family life. Increasing the understanding of gender equality was an important strategic element in the effort to enable more women to enter decision-making positions, and to provide opportunities for women and girls from all ethnic groups to access health care, social services, education, training and employment. Social protection was also an important theme, and strengthening the National Committee for Advancement of Women (NCAW) was a major step in this direction.

But despite progress, large differences in development levels, poverty and gender equality still exist among the different geographical areas and ethnic groups. Ethnicity correlates strongly with location factors, and is a major determinant of poverty. Only one in four members of the majority ethno-linguistic Lao-Tai

group live in poverty, compared to nearly one in two in the Mon-Khmer, Hmong-Lu Mien and Sino-Tibetan groups.

### **A training programme**

The Gender Development Association (GDA) is a Lao non-profit organisation. Between 2015 and 2017 it implemented a project to promote gender equality through the rule of law and good governance. It targeted the Lao capital Vientiane, as well as the Vientiane province. Building local capacity for women's empowerment was one of the project's successes in the Mad district, and involved Khmu, Hmong and Lao Tai multi ethnic groups in ten villages. Five hundred men and five hundred women were the direct beneficiaries. As a result of this project, there was an increase in women's access to information, their decision-making ability showed improvement, and their social security was boosted through livelihood strategies that facilitated their access to resources and employment.

The project collected and analysed data on gender-based violence and traditional practices in the ethnic minority areas. It was also involved in protecting women and girls from gender-based violence, and ensuring that civil society organisations and government agencies, at national and provincial

*Cover Drama acting by students from one of the selected schools in the Mad district*



*Above Participants had the opportunity to practice how to facilitate the training sessions themselves*

levels, had access to relevant judicial procedures. Teachers, students and other stakeholders were given training on gender-based violence, and materials were produced and distributed to non-profit organisations and government counterparts. Training sessions were monitored and evaluated.

GDA provided training on gender research methodology, analysis, interviewing and reporting, and a questionnaire was developed and tested in different villages. Particular emphasis was placed on how to collect data on gender-sensitive issues, and on how to create situations where women would be prepared to speak to outsiders.

GDA ran a gender equality baseline survey among the different ethnic groups, and a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) helped understand the general situation in the villages of Namhan, Samakhisay, Sysaattai, Namon, Nonsavard, Nayap, Nampou, Namfeung, Nangueive and Nadorkkhoun. Different village Women's Unions, as well as representatives of the district and province unions, and counterparts of the Sub-Committee for the Advancement of Women, were trained with the aim of developing participants' capacity to identify and monitor gender issues. Gender training was also given to those with a specific and

respected village status, including many village chiefs. An analysis of the prevalent violence against women and children, as well as the role of village mediation units, were important elements in these training sessions. These sessions also gave participants the opportunity to practice how training sessions should be facilitated.

Mad district officers trained the village authorities on issues that included the role of mediation units at the village and district level, international treaties and domestic mechanisms, and also looked at the existing laws and policies dealing with women's rights. The role of the Women's Union was also emphasised. Particular attention was given to the problems that might arise if mediation units could not handle specific issues. Participants subsequently developed plans for the gender training session they would hold in their village one month after the training-of-trainers programme.

Secondary school teachers received training on gender and gender-based violence issues, as well as on the division of labour at a household level. In a practical training, they also saw how this could be extended within schools. At the same time, together with trainers from the provincial and district unions, teachers organised a training-of-trainers session in five selected schools.

As a result of the gender awareness sessions, community members saw the implications and effect of a gender-based division of labour. Discussions led to a better understanding of the roles men and women could play in every household.

A further awareness raising activity involved teachers, adding the gender issue to the curriculum followed by students at five schools. This took place in the Mad district and emphasised the importance of understanding gender based-violence, sex and equal rights. After the training, the students were coached by their teachers as they prepared work plans detailing how to disseminate this information to other students and people in their communities.

The students from these five schools used the information they had received to develop drama shows for the local community. Those who had participated in the shows said they gained a better understanding of the general situation, and of the risks women (and children) face. These drama shows were particularly important for villagers who could not speak Lao – especially the Khmu and Hmong.

Educational and communication materials were produced and disseminated for use amongst the staff of the National Protected Areas (NPAs) and by government counterparts. Posters describing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

**Table 1.** Number of students attending drama shows

#	Schools	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
1	Mouang Mad high school	151	147	298
2	Nakangpa high school	243	160	403
3	Mouagkhi high school	147	174	321
4	Nadee secondary school	80	58	138
5	Numpan secondary school	155	104	259
	<b>Total:</b>	<b>776</b>	<b>643</b>	<b>1,419</b>



Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) were provided and shared, as well as CDs with thematic songs. A drama contest was also important in enhancing the capacity of local women, and the project also developed a DVD that could be used for training and campaign purposes.

## Challenges

There are many challenges when it comes to the issue of empowering women. Changing the attitudes of district officers, as well as those of women and men in the target villages, requires time as well as different “push factors”. Further complications include the fact that many ethnic women have limited access to education and trustworthy sources of information. Language barriers also have to be taken into consideration.

Natural disasters such as drought, flash floods and landslides affect the livelihoods of communities who rely on agriculture, and have to be taken into consideration when planning training sessions. Community members also have little time to participate in training courses during the planting season. Meetings can take place only once a month – on the full moon day which is considered to be a holiday for both men and women.

Poor roads and a lack of infrastructure makes coordination between the local government authorities, the communities and the Gender Development Association difficult, and means that more time is needed to prepare, monitor and report activities. Time is also needed to organise project activities and build up a feeling of ownership among communities and local authorities.

On the other hand, villagers found it difficult, and sometimes confusing, to give information on gender equality and violence towards women. Given the fact that under the customary division of labour it is the man who is involved in all community affairs, it was a challenge to get the women’s views on gender inequality and the violence they experience.

## Impact

The project review indicated that twenty teachers and fifty secondary schools students had become peer educators and “gender focal points”. They are now able to transfer the knowledge they have gained to their peers. In addition, the project evaluation showed that the livelihoods of the target communities have improved, and that villagers have a better understanding of the importance of gender equality, leading to workloads being shared between men and women. There is a significant reduction in family violence.



In the project review, the district representative reported that many men and women are now more aware of the laws regulating the protection of women. More village women are able to speak out during meetings and negotiations, and more men are assisting women with household chores. This has given women the opportunity to become village leaders and participate in meetings inside and outside their village. In addition, violence against women seems to have decreased. The village chief of Numfeung, for example, observed that violence against women and children in his village has fallen by 80%.

Recognition of the rights of women has increased, and the fact that many women have now been elected to the position of chief or vice-chief in their village confirms this development. The Mad district’s Vice Governor drew attention to the villages of Nadorkkhoud and Nangiew, where two women were elected as vice-chiefs, to show that women can now become leaders. The village gender focal points and village mediation units have also led to women helping solve family problems and conflicts.

*Above Interviewing villagers in the Mad district and then sharing the main observations made*





*Above Drama shows proved to be very effective among teachers and students*

It is clear that the engagement of many stakeholders at a provincial, district and village level is needed to extend knowledge on gender equality and rights to others, and promote the practice of gender equality. A concrete example of this at a policy level is the way in which the Vice Governor of the Mad district and other authorities have included these issues in the district's strategic socio-economic development plan. The elements they have included are directly related to what they learned during their training sessions.

## **Conclusions**

Before the implementation of this project, gender inequality, violence against women, and their inability to access justice were prevalent in the target communities. Now it is possible to say that attitudes and practices with respect to gender have changed significantly. Women's rights have improved and they receive the recognition needed to enable them to play leading roles in their communities.

In addition, gender issues have now been mainstreamed and are part of the local government's social and economic development plans. However, despite these positive results, many traditional and cultural practices remain, particularly among ethnic groups, many of whom are disadvantageous to women. There is still a lot of work to do. It is therefore positive that the training programme included practical advice on how to extend and sustain all activities. After the village focal persons had developed their plans, the district team planned a set of follow up and support steps.



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